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AUTHOR Cross, Geoffrey A.
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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study used M. M. Bakhtin's language theory of socially rooted multiple voices to compare the group-writing processes of two corporate documents. Data were collected during a 5-month participant observation of the production processes of a 504-word executive letter, which took 55 days from first draft to approval, and a 1,851-word corporate annual plan which, although recounting largely the same story of the letter, required only 15 days from first draft to approval. Observation of the groups and Bakhtin's discussion of utterance as the process of articulation yielded three views of collaborative writing: (1) group writing as cacophony; (2) group writing as monotone; and (3) group writing as symphony. Examination of the differences (in purpose, audience, message, and process) revealed that the chief reason that the letter took over three times as long to write as the longer report was because of the gradual consolidation of power occurring in the corporate culture, fostering first a cacophonous and finally a monovocal writing process. Furthermore, neither process was particularly successful because important information was ignored or suppressed as people talked past each other or became mouthpieces of the most powerful member of the hierarchy. (Two figures and two tables of data are included; a 19 references are attached.) (KEH)

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Group Writing in Industry: A Bakhtinian Exploration of Two Collaborations

Geoffrey A. Cross
Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of Louisville

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(Paper presented 11/7/89 at the Association for Business Communication International Convention, 11/7-10/89, in Las Vegas, Nevada)

Abstract

My ethnographic research compares the group-writing processes of two corporate documents. Data were collected during a five-month participant observation. This paper uses the language theory of M.M. Bakhtin to consider the interrelation of genre, context, and process in two group-writing situations.

GROUP WRITING IN INDUSTRY: A BAKHTINIAN EXPLORATION OF TWO COLLABORATIONS

Why would the group writing of a 504-word executive letter of an annual report take 55 days from first draft to approval while the group writing of a 1851-word corporate annual plan of the same organization, recounting largely the same story, take only 15 days from first draft to approval? As we can see by looking at Table 1, the differences in the production processes of the two documents are considerable, although perhaps not in ways we might expect. The shorter executive letter required seven drafts and a total of 153 suggestions and changes from editors. The longer, more involved planning report was done in four drafts and generated only 26 editorial suggestions and changes. What is more, while only 114 of 155 requested editorial changes (73.5%) were implemented by the writer of the letter, 24 of 26 requested editorial changes (92.3%) were implemented by the writer of the report. What caused this disparity?

Such questions about "team writing" are important because while group-writing is a significant component of real-world work (Lunsford and Ede, 1986; Anderson, 1985), only a few published descriptive studies focused upon the subject exist (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, and Snow, 1987). The writing processes that I will discuss took place in late 1986 and early 1987 by the Auldouest Insurance Corporation (pseudonym). The data for the study were collected during a five-month participant observation at the company. The presentation is an extension of my 1988

doctoral study, advised by Edward P.J. Corbett and Kitty O. Locker.

This paper will use the language theory of M.M. Bakhtin to propose an answer to my question and to propose a grounded theory of collaborative writing. Bakhtin (1981) asserts that there exist in language powerful unifying and dividing forces. Centripetal forces are "the forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world" [author's emphasis] (p. 270). Such forces are pushing toward a "unitary language," that Bakhtin views not as a grammatical system but rather as an "ideologically saturated . . . world view" (p. 271). But simultaneously, centrifugal forces are pushing toward linguistic disunity.

These forces in language are socially rooted. As Holquist notes, Bakhtin's forces "are respectively the centralizing and decentralizing (or decentering) forces in any language or culture. The rulers . . . of any era exercise a centripetal--a homogenizing and hierarchicizing--influence." Centrifugal forces, on the other hand, are "dispersing" (p. 425). Clearly, these forces exhibit a strong potential for conflict. "The processes of centralization and unification," Bakhtin argues, "intersect in the utterance" with the forces of decentralization.

Bakhtin regards the utterance as the concrete product of any speech act (p. 272). But when utterance is seen not only as an end aggregation but as an aggregative process, particularly as a social (group) process, then we can see how the socially rooted

forces clash or otherwise "intersect" in the interaction of the group members composing the end product. As Bakhtin tells us, "It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of a language" (p. 272).

In a culture where the power is unstable and somewhat dispersed, there occurs "a struggle between socio-linguistic points of view." Bakhtin calls the locus of this struggle "heteroglossia." Often the product of this shouting match of multiple voices, is cacophony. But when power becomes centralized, a unitary voice and point of view prevails. We might say that then monotony ("monotone" pronounced with a long "e") ensues--or at least monovocality. The only instance that Bakhtin mentions where we find multiple voices presenting views in productive dialogue is in the discourse of the novel, where the novelist orchestrates all voices into a harmonious, overarching whole that subsumes without stifling the multiple viewpoints. Again looking at utterance as the process of articulation, we can say that Bakhtin's discussion yields three views of group writing: 1) group writing as cacophony, 2) group writing as monotone(or y), and 3) group writing as symphony. I will argue today that the chief reason that the letter took over three times as long to write as the longer report is because of the gradual consolidation of power occurring in the corporate culture, fostering first a cacophonous and finally a monovocal

writing process. I will also argue that neither process was particularly successful because important information was ignored or suppressed as people talked past each other or became mouthpieces of the most powerful member of the hierarchy.

Let's consider how monovocality and cacophony manifested themselves in differences in the production of these two documents.

Differences in Purpose

Different communicative strategies and goals encouraged heteroglossia in the writing process of the executive letter and encouraged accord in the writing process of the planning report. The executive letter was the primary means of communication of its information. The letter was expected to be a self-contained text, able to stand alone to communicate its message. But the report was part of a multi-media transmission of information. Corporate communications had planned to do a lead video story for its video magazine announcing corporate goals for the next year. More importantly, the planning report was to serve as a point of reference for individual objectives-setting conferences between managers and subordinates. Here any objections to the plans could be discussed. Thus most audience objections to the plan were not addressed in the document. So there was not the conflict over placating the needs of various audiences that took place during the production of the executive letter.

Several purposes competed for space in the brief executive letter. Two conflicting purposes were considered essential by

different members of the writing group. Some members believed that the letter should present Auldouest as successful so that the company would attain peer-company recognition and more corporate customers. Other members wanted to disclose that the company had not earned an operating profit and to represent the company as struggling within a troubled industry. These members believed that this approach would make Auldouest's 500,000 policyholders more receptive to rate increases. Auldouest's 1986 results supported both positions, providing plenty of data to feed both sides of the conflict that ensued.

The purposes of the planning report, on the other hand, were related rather than opposed. The document was to 1) describe how close the company got to its previous year's objectives, 2) to show how readers fit into this year's plans, and 3) to motivate people to fit into the plan of action. Because employees were an internal audience, the fact that the company had not made an operating profit could be revealed. While the top executives may not have wanted to disclose this information to agents--the other audience of the report--no discussion of this ensued during the document-production process.

Another issue that did not surface was a conflict over whether to disclose to agents the company's policy of providing more advertising and other support to areas assessed to have high growth potential. At least one member feared that agents might, as he said, "draw a negative inference from that that we are not interested in the agents in medium potential areas and low

potential areas." But this conflict was settled only after the document was approved. Addressed to both employees and agents, the approved draft mentioned the policy. But the report was simply not sent to agents. So heteroglossia was avoided in the process at the expense of writers addressing an audience during composing that later did not receive their text. Three members of the writing team, for instance, made careful efforts to phrase the agent support policy as diplomatically as possible. These efforts were wasted.

Differences in Audience

Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic nature of writing presumes that utterances are shaped by audiences, that utterances often come out of previous dialogues with the audience of the discourse. Because audience is the central concern of persuasive writing, as Kinneavy (1971, 39) points out, and because the executive letter had a 15-constituency composite external audience with conflicting interests, the impetus to meet conflicting needs of various audiences had great influence upon the group-writing process of the executive letter. By contrast, the report had only one external audience--agents.

Working on the letter, different editors championed the needs of different audiences, and conflict ensued. And there were more editors to champion different audiences than there were editors working on the report (7 vs. 5). Of course the seven letter editors were also internal audiences. So we have a total

of 22 different audiences for the letter compared to the report's seven.

Moreover, heteroglossia in the letter-writing process was compounded because each member of the writing group expected the document to go to a different composite audience (see Table 2). On the other hand, all members of the planning report team expected the document to go to the same audience--agents and employees. The President changed the audience only after the document was approved.

Because it was being sent to many external audiences, including business clients and peer companies, the letter's tone was formal. The formal tone demanded more attention to what the CEO and President perceived to be the conventions of Standard Edited American English. This need brought in the company's executive secretaries, who imposed some idiosyncratic notions of Standard Edited American English along with making real corrections and thus created conflict by irritating writers and editors who could not understand these mistaken "corrections." In one instance, for example, a secretary substituted "halt" for "stop" because she believed that to stop meant to halt temporarily.

The report, on the other hand, had a more informal, newslettery approach, a more conversational, intimate style that promoted group unity. "In that case," as the Supervisor of Corporate Communication explained to me, "the paranoid button was turned down . . . because you are not being watched by an entire

industry or anybody who could get their mitts on that particular document. . . . Let's face it--the critics that you don't know sometimes scare you more than the critics that you do." So hypercorrectness was not desired in the report, and there were no "authorities" brought in to impose idiosyncratic "corrections."

Differences in Message

During the writing of the letter, conflict ensued over which facts to present, which tone to color them with, and what story to tell with them about the company's performance during the year. Only 42 days into the writing process did these issues begin to be resolved when the President convinced the CEO and forced his subordinates to accept his view of Auldouest's performance for the year. Forty-two days into the writing of the letter, the "recovering but still in the hospital" story that the company had told about itself in previous years under the leadership of the CEO was rejected in favor of the President's "success story" version of the year. When it came time to do the report, the entry-level writer who had originally ghostwritten the executive letter and participated in the power struggle between competing stories now knew very well how to interpret Auldouest's 1986 performance. She repeated most of the success story, although she added that the company had lost money. But this information was already known by many employees, and further it was deemphasized as the only "disappointment" of the year by the president in an interview in the report. Since the President

had consolidated power in the previous writing process, his centripetal viewpoint now prevailed.

The format of the letter also contributed to heteroglossia during the process. The letter was a single, short message, ostensibly from the President and the CEO. It needed a unitary point of view. Because there were eight people with different points of view based upon different perceptions of audience working on the letter, one could expect conflict in the struggle to present a monovocal text. The letter was expected to be the "personal, subjective" account of the year from the company's leaders. Voice was emphasized. But actually eight different voices added text to the letter, and voices struggled for empowerment--the right to be heard. Indeed, 42 days into the process, three writers independently started the letter over again "from scratch." Finally, and not surprisingly, the most powerful and closest voice subordinate to the President, the Senior Vice President, was empowered to write the final draft of the letter.

The report, on the other hand, was what Ralph Lowenstein, in Media, Messages, and Men, calls "internally specialized." It consisted of several compartmentalized subgenres including a summary "memo" from the President; a 1-page interview with the President recounting the year; a 1-page report of 1986 objectives and results; a 2-page article on 1987 goals, with interviews from the three members of the planning committee; a 1-page list of long-range goals; and a 1-page organization flowchart. Here

several voices were heard from, but only "on paper," as it were. The President, after the document was approved, centripetally silenced all voices by not sending the plan to agents, with whom the plan would have caused controversy. In addition, the internal specialization made editors less accountable for the entire document, as we shall see, and so there was not a struggle, not heteroglossia. For at least some editors, responsibility was compartmentalized.

Differences in Process

Unlike the executive-letter writing group, the report team avoided conflicts during the approvals process. This outcome was due in part to the specific, direct communication between writer and editors. The Vice President of R&D gave commands rather than suggestions about editing. By contrast, the Supervisor of Corporate Communications, the Writer's chief editor during the production of the letter, gave suggestions but allowed the Writer to ignore many of them and provide her own solutions that were later rejected by other managers.

While the Writer talked directly to all editors of the report and had taped interviews, she had to get many responses to the letter second- or third-hand or worse, passed down the hierarchy in a serial chain of communication that distorted or omitted many messages. For example, when the President communicated the newly defined letter concept 35 days into the writing process, he told the Senior Vice President to mention

"industry performance." But this topic had become "opportunities" by the time it reached the Supervisor and Writer.

Because the letter was highly valued by the two leaders of the organization and because those that contributed would be visible to those with the most control over the half-billion dollar resources of the company, each member of the writing team placed great importance upon the letter. But because the planning report was not "going out under their names," the Vice President-Information Systems and the Vice President-Personnel were not as concerned about that document. The lower status of the document, the lessened stake those participants had, created less impetus to fight.

Finally, the hierarchical distribution of power worked conflictively in the production of the letter and accordantly in the production of the report (see Figure 1). After a brainstorming meeting with top executives, the writing of the letter was delegated to an entry-level writer who wasn't in on the meeting. The letter then had to be approved at every step of the ladder up to the top again, bringing in three editors who had not been in the planning session--the Senior Vice President and the two executive secretaries. Thus the hierarchical distribution of power forced a number of centripetal voices into the text. But the report, on the other hand, was drafted by the Writer and then sent to the chair of the planning committee, so three levels of the organization had been hopped (see Figure 2). Those editors were afterwards afraid to make too many changes

because they were outranked. So the process was more monovocal, less conflictive.

Neither group writing process was particularly successful. The executive-letter writing process was inordinately long by Auldouest's standards, involved highly-paid managers for prolonged periods of time, left at least two participants demoralized, and ended up ignoring a major audience--500,000 policyholders who got Auldouest's celebration of financial success along with an announcement of rate increases. The report-writing process was shorter, but still involved highly paid managers wasting time addressing a non-audience of the document. Neither the cacophonous-then-monovocal executive letter process or the monovocal report process made full use of the best thinking of writing group members. The alternative suggested by Bakhtin's language theory is utterance or process as orchestrated heteroglossia. Here voices do not "talk past each other" or parrot the "Big Man." Rather, different viewpoints are orchestrated into a totality that yields the power of focused, collective effort.

I have begun with a question, and I shall end with a question. Who should take the role of Bakhtin's novelist who subsumes all voices an overarching whole? Doheny-Farina's writers in an emergent organization found that the committee was best able to produce a synthesis that met organizational needs. Machiavelli, on the other hand, argues that the single leader can be the most efficient governor. Who should produce the synthesis

should produce the synthesis of voices that yields the most power? The committee? Or the good prince?

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CEO

CEO's Secretary

President

President's Secretary

Senior Vice President

Vice President

Supervisor

Writer

Figure 1: Approvals Process of the Executive Letter

President

VP-R&D (Chair, Planning Committee)

VP-Info Systems (Members of Planning Committee) VP-Personnel

VP-Corporate Communications

Supervisor-Corporate Communications

Writer

Figure 2: The Approvals Process of the Planning Report

Table 1:
Comparison of the Writing Processes of the Executive Letter and Planning Report

	Ex Let	Pln Rpt
Words	504	1851
Length of Approval Proc. (from 1st dr.)	55 days	15 days
Drafts	7	4
Editorial Suggestions & Changes Implemented/ Suggestions & Changes Given	114/153 (74%)	24/26 (92%)

Table 2: Perceived External Audiences of the Executive Letter

Actual Audience	Writer/Editor						
	Pres.	SVP	CEO Sec	Pr Sec	VP	Super	Writer
Fam/Friends of 33	x						
Other CEO's	1[a]	1	x		x	1*[b]	1*
Other Ins. Staff	x	x	x		x	x	
Bankers					x		
Chamber of Commerce	x						
Comp. Reps w. Clients		x					
Potential Com. Polhldrs.	x	x			x		
Commercial Polhldrs.	x				x	x	
Potent. Agents					x		
Agents	x	x	1		x	x	
Pot. Employees		x			x	x	
Pot. Dom. Polhldrs.							
Domestic Polhldrs.		x			1	x	
Media					x	x	
Public				1	x		

[a] 1 = most important; [b] * = most important external audience. The Supervisor's most important audiences were the President, the CEO, and other CEO's. The Writer's most important audiences were the President and the CEO.